DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 242 UD 019 795

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TITLE Multicultural Education, A Concept Paper.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Cultural Pluralism; Educational Administration; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Minority Groups; *Multicultural Education; *Political Influences; Public Education; *Social Factors

ABSTRACT

This paper explores some reasons why the concept of multicultural education did not exist until recently, what the concept is, and some directions that educational administrators might take to promote cultural pluralism in education. Social and political conditions which led to the idea of multicultural education are reviewed. It is argued that minority group dissatisfaction with the educational system's focus on homogeneity was the stimulus for the development of the concept. Multicultural education is described as a commitment to a social system that will revere human dignity and the worth of the individual. Factors that should be considered by educational administrators in an effort to develop a climate of interest, concern and involvement in multicultural education are outlined. (Author/EB)

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AUG 2 1979

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MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION
A CONCEPT PAPER

by

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America has for years prided herself on being the melting pot of the world because her citizenry has been comprised of diverse ethnic, racial, and social groups. In word, i.e., in writing and through verbalization, diverse groups have been led to believe that they share the same rights as any American citizen inclusive of the right to a free education in the nation's public schools. Consequently, the melting pot ethic has been tolerated rather passively. No one, especially minority groups, rebelled with much force about the degree to which cultural differences were not honored in society or in public education until the 1960's. From then until the present, many have taken a closer look at the deeds of the educational establishment and its pirorities only to find that the facts regarding American cultural diversity have been either purposely omitted or distorted; that public education has never been committed to multi-ethnicity; and, that the educational system has no sense of how to construct a curriculum and deliver effective functioning in one cultural world, the Anglo-American middle-class, and public education has been used to perpetuate this racial assumption. This state of affairs is crucial to the well-being of a society which espouses dignity and worth of the individual.

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Considering the magnitude of the damage that has been done due to American society's inconsistency in word and deed, a start has to be made somewhere to bring about a healthy interaction between the diverse groups which comprise the nation's citizenry. Since some feel that multicultural education is a starting point, this paper will explore some reasons why multicultural

education, heretofore, has been non-existent, where we are now in terms of the concept, and some direction that educational administrators might take to promote cultural pluralism in education.

A statement formulated by the Commission on Multicultural Education and adopted in 1972 by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education reiterates the message that minority groups are currently trying to relate to American society and its system of public education. The message is that cultural pluralism endorses the principle that there is no one model American. The statement which is a position paper on multicultural education takes a point of view which promotes synergy as the most feasible vehicle for implementing an educational program that will restructure our value system so that honor and respect will be given cultural pluralism. Synergy is "a society where people cooperate together for mutual advantages because the customs of society make cooperation worthwhile (5:112)."

That the complexion of American society is culturally pluralistic is a fact of life. But, cultural diversity has been neither fully recognized nor valued in America. Any observer who looks critically at the educational system in terms of overall structure, attitude, leadership, finance and curriculum, can see that individuality and differences in American citizens are denigrated. School systems reflect the beliefs and values of society as a whole. Such being the case, relevance from the point of view of the system pertains to homogenized mainstream cultural options.

Minority group dissatisfaction with the system's attempt to produce homogeneity ignited the whole idea of multicultural education. Some argue that technological progress is partially responsible for society's expectations for schools because it "fosters political centralization, standardization of behavior, and mass consumerism (2:266)." Minority groups and other advocates

of multicultural education critize this argument as but another defense of ideologies which are in keeping with the melting pot ethic which implies melt away the differences through assimilation or amalgamation and the resulting product is Anglo-conformity.

Bernier sees little difference between the assimilative and amalgamative models of social adaptation. Both are designed to promote monoculturalism, to suppress meaningful diversity, and to destroy other cultures. He related that advocates of assimilation consciously deny equal "opportunities to fellow citizens and use professional rhetoric to mask the fact. The amalgamation construct, on the other hand, affirms that all cultures will freely amalgamate and the creation of a superior American will result. Melting away the minority culture and popularizing White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism would result in neither WASP nor a cultural mixture but a robot conditioned to adaptation and imitation (2:267)."

The thinking which supports the amalgamative and assimilative constructs disagrees with Maslow's perceptions of a healthy society. He observed that in a society where truth is distorted or withheld, the effects on the society are negative leading to distrust, cynicism, suspicion, and poor interpersonal relationships (5:106)." His work in the area of the synergic society, which is based on a study of cultures done by Ruth Benedict, indicates there are societies with high social synergy and low social synergy. A high synergic society is characterized by non-aggression, wherein the individual by the same act and at the same time serves his own advantages and that of the group. Benedict posits that non-aggression occurs, not because people are unselfish, but becuase social obligations are put above personal desires, and institutions insure mutual advantage by making the two identical. On the other hand, societies with low social synergy are described as societies where the advantage of one individual becomes a victory over another, and the majority who are not victorious

must shift as they can (5:112).

While Maslow describes American society as a society of mixed snyergy, Bernier derides it as a low synergic society, for as he states, "ethnic groups are refusing to succumb to the wishes of individuals and organizations who equate socialization with acquiescence and education with deculturalization (2:267). He argues that the dual system of education in this country is a typical example of how the rhetoric of the melting pot ethic works. Through the socialization and deculturalization process, schools attempt to mold individuals into standardized personality types. By defining individuals in terms of their deficiencies, which are simply deviations from white middleclass norms in behaviors, attitudes and skills, schools demonstrate the belief that cultural differences equal cultural deprivation.

Castaneda notes that philosophical assumptions such as these must be re-examined because true democracy does not exist if the principle of cultural democracy is not addressed. He defines cultural democracy as "the right of every American... to remain identified with his own ethnic, racial, or social group while at the same time exploring mainstream American cultural forms with regard to language, heritage, values, cognition, and motivation (3:15)."

Hunter also indicates that "since historians and educators have either distorted or omitted the facts regarding American cultural diversity, multi-cultural education has become a major need in restructuring today's educational values, morality, and concepts (7:262)."

President Johnson too, recognized that the concept of cultural pluralism was being too frequently denied in thought and action. In 1968, he took a lead, in answering the charge that American philosophical assumptions needed reexamining by appointing The President's Commission for the Observance of Human Rights. Aware of the need for basic changes in the social structure and feeling that education was the only means by which attitudes could be

changes, prejudices modified, and understanding developed, the Commission summed up the current state of affairs and the apathy of American society toward cultural diversity in the following manner:

> "American educational institutions reflect racial and class distinctions even though those responsible for them often claim that they are seeking to erase the problem. The public schools remain in large part segregated by race, and many of the minority group schools have the worst facilities, the highest teacher turnover, and the least support. These facts, in turn, raise questions about the school support policies at local, state, and federal levels of government.
>
> The existence of these distinctions governs the fact that the quality of education provided for American children differs according to their race, economic, and social class status (6:149)."

While the President's Commission for Human Rights devised a model for planning and implementing changes in specific areas of education as a means of eliminating racism, The Commission on Multicultural Education identified four thrusts that education should take to promote cultural pluralism. The former recommended specific actions to take to achieve three ends: 1) to effect attitudinal changes, 2) to bring about structural and institutional changes, and 3) to bring about changes designed to improve the quality of education (6:150, 6:151). The latter recommended: 1) "the teaching of values which support cultural diversity and individual uniqueness, 2) the encouragement of qualitative expansion of existing ethnic cultures and their incorporation into the mainstream of American socioeconomic and political life, 3) the support of explorations in alternative and emerging life styles, and 4) the encouragement of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multidialectism (4:264)."

Without a doubt the educational system is left with and charged with the responsibility of providing leadership for the development of individual commitment to a social system that will revere human dignity and the worth of the individual.

This is a monumental task because multicultural education rejects the idea that schools should melt away cultural differences for the idea of acceptance and appreciation of diversity in others. It disagrees with the view that cultural diversity should be just tolerated in preference to a view which addresses meaningful work integrated with satisfying intimacy and productive leisure. It does not refer to cultural maintenance or transfusions to keep cultures statically surviving in their present form, rather it advocates maximum exploration of a multiplicity of life options in every endeavor instead of a homogeneous norm (4:264, 2:266).

The question arises concerning how a top administrator in an urban setting politically addresses herself to the problem.

Educational change and adaptation should provide for reorganization of the total educational system so that across the board adjustments can be made to accomodate, in this case, culturally pluralistic approaches. In an effort to develop a climate of interest, concern, and involvement in multicultural education, a top administrator might consider the following:

A. Commitment to the objectives of multicultural education.

B. Development of avenues for the solicitation of ideas related to interpersonal relations, structural changes, and quality education.

C. Establishment of policy and allocation of personal and other resources to implement the concept.

D. Development of avenues for providing academic, vocational, recreational, and leisure-time multicultural and educational experiences for school personnel, students, parents and the school community.

E. Revision of curricula on all levels, to ensure that the substance of education, particularly in history, the social sciences, and the humanities, is made relevant to questions of social justice and social change.

F. Development of a massive program in in-service training for teachers to compensate for their deficits in the understanding of human differences and potentialities and to gain an intimate knowledge of their pupils and the communities from which they come.

G. Development of a massive program of adult and public education in the problems and the negative social consequences of racism.

H. Development of an extensive program of school-community relations having as its objective the provision of potential strategies and techniques germane to multicultural education.

I. Development of system-wide school advocacy efforts in the form of seminars, symposia, and workshops designed to apprise the community of school needs, school progress, pupil interest and needs, staff accomplishments, etc.

J. Development of an on-going community, staff, parent, student encounter group program whereby encounters may take place in an environment which is conducive to welding diverse individuals into a cohesive unit.

K. Development of continuous inter-school system "rap sessions" designed to acquaint schools with the programs and activities of each other and to brainstorm ideas that may prove useful to others in developing similar programs.

L. Development of plans for reciprocal cooperation of allied educational agencies serving the school community and having common goals and objectives.

M. Development of processes for continued input, evaluation revision and adaptation of innovative ideas.

N. Development of an intensive and on-going mass media effort designed to point out the activities of the school system relative to multicultural education.

This list of considerations is hardly complete yet, it represents a starting point for planning strategies that address themselves to multi-cultural education. As has been mentioned, the task is monumental, and as an unknown author writes,

"To know about cultures
and faiths other than
our own is not enough.
We must enlarge our understanding
and awareness
of the ways that others
deal with the
needs and experiences
of all human beings....."

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